

# The Turtle Moves

A literary study of Terry Pratchett's Omnianism

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a close reading of Terry Pratchett's *Small Gods* in the framework of postmodern literary theory. *Small Gods* is a fantasy novel, which has the history of a made-up religion called Omnianism as its central narrative. The motivation for this thesis came from the feeling that Pratchett's parodical approach could be a front to a deeper message, which could be uncovered in a close reading. In addition to searching for the postmodern themes in *Small Gods* I tried to look for the reasons for these themes surfacing in the novel. My close reading found numerous postmodern themes throughout the novel, and the parody Pratchett makes of Christianity was the most prominent postmodern theme present. Another theme that appeared a lot in the novel was the idea that while the Omnianism is a parody, it also holds a mirror to Christianity, highlighting the flaws that can be found in both religions. I found out that the parody and celebration of fragmentation of faith and authority of ages past seem to be rooted in Pratchett's apparent atheism. The thesis suggests that Pratchett's other fictional religious institutions could be worth studying, as well as his political parody, using this thesis as a frame of reference.

## Tiivistelmä

Tämä tutkielma on lähiluku Terry Pratchettin kirjasta *Pienet Jumalat* postmodernistisen metodologian pohjalta. *Pienet Jumalat* on fantasiakirja, jonka keskiössä on kuvitteellisen uskonnon, Omnianismin, historia. Motivaatio tähän tutkimukseen syntyi ajatuksesta, että Pratchettin parodia kätkee taakseen syvemmän viestin, mikä voisi selkeytyä lähiluvun ansiosta. Postmodernististen teemojen etsinnän lisäksi pyrin löytämään *Pienistä Jumalista* syitä näiden teemojen esiintymiselle. Lähilukuni paljasti monia postmodernistisia teemoja läpi koko teoksen ja Pratchettin parodia kristinuskosta oli teoksen kantava teema. Toinen yleinen teema teoksessa oli ajatus siitä, että Omnianismi ei ole pelkästään kristinuskon parodia, vaan heijastaa kristinuskon huonoimpia piirteitä, tuoden ne esille. Tutkimus paljasti, että teoksessa esiintyvä parodia ja menneisyyden uskon ja auktoriteetin hajoaminen vaikuttavat juontavan juurensa Pratchettin ilmeiseen ateismiin. Tutkimuksen perusteella Pratchettin muut kuvitteelliset uskonnot voisivat olla houkuttelevia tutkimuksen kohteita tämän tutkimuksen pohjalta, kuten myös hänen poliittinen parodiansa.

## Table of Contents

1 Introduction.....	1
2 Omnianism meets Christianity .....	2
2.1 Churches intertwined .....	2
2.2 Omnianism as a parody .....	3
3 Pratchett as a postmodern writer .....	7
4 Pratchett and atheism .....	12
5 Conclusions.....	16
Works cited.....	18

## 1 Introduction

Sir Terry Pratchett is the creator of Discworld: a world that exists right on the edge of reality. Pratchett writes that the world ‘only exists because every improbability curve must have its far end’. The world falls into the fantasy genre. Pratchett, however, is not a typical fantasy writer. He takes real world issues and makes a fantasy world parody of them. One such parody is Omnianism, which is the focus of this thesis.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore whether Omnianism is a general parody of monotheistic religions or does it have a specific religion it relates to. In addition, this thesis aims to find out some of the motives behind Pratchett’s parody. This thesis will study Pratchett’s book *Small Gods* in length, due to it being the pivotal in the history of Omnianism and try to find the similarities and differences between Christianity and other major monotheistic religions. In order to study Omnianism, the thesis will have to accommodate some aspects of the history of Christianity to find possible similarities, especially concerning the Spanish Inquisition, commandments found in Christianity and the Crusades. Pratchett’s other works will also be scrutinized in order to find common themes between books when inspecting Omnianism. The thesis will also serve as a close reading of *Small Gods* in the framework of postmodern literary theory Peter Barry’s views on literary theory as a theoretical basis, in order to discover if it has underlying postmodern themes in it, as parody is most commonly found in postmodernism. To discover the motives behind Pratchett’s views on gods and religion as depicted in Omnianism the thesis will examine the possibility of Pratchett writing as an atheist and investigate why one would write about gods and religion if one is an atheist. The thesis will not consider Pratchett’s political views or parodies, beyond those that are directly tied to the history of Christianity. The thesis found that Omnianism seems very similar to Christianity, and that Pratchett’s work is filled with postmodernist themes. The motive behind Pratchett’s style of writing seems to stem from his apparent atheism.

## **2. Omnianism meets Christianity**

Omnianism is one of Discworld's many religions. It is a monotheistic religion that fights everyone that goes against its dogma, be it devout of another religion or scientists who disagree with the Omnian world view. At some point Omnianism changes its views on other religions due to one man's reformation of the religion. After that Omnianism is a peaceful religion, using words instead of thumbscrews to convert prospective believers. At this point Omnians go around preaching to people of the great god Om and hand out pamphlets with information of his deeds and commandments. Nothing is certain anymore. Every interpretation of Om's word is accepted and debated. Even the existence of the prophet Brutha is debated.

### **2.1 The Churches intertwined**

At a glance Omnianism seems a parody of a typical monotheistic religion. For example, it has eight prophets, much like Islam. By looking further into it we can see clear signs of a specific religion: Christianity. Galileo Galilei was a firm believer in and advocate of heliocentrism, according to which the Earth revolves around the sun. Sedley Taylor (1874) tells this theory was considered to border on heresy by the Catholic Church and eventually Galilei had to recant his theory. According to a popular legend, he muttered the phrase "E pur si muove" which means "and yet it moves." This is reflected in Omnianism: The Church follows a heliocentric view of the universe, even though in Pratchett's Discworld the world is flat, is carried on the backs of four elephants, which in turn stand on the back of a giant turtle. The celestial bodies revolve around the world-turtle. The philosophers of Pratchett's world try to promote this theory. The masterpiece of the philosopher Didactylos is named *De Chelonian Mobile*, or *The Turtle Moves*. This seems to be a nod towards Galileo's alleged phrase.

The eighth prophet of the Great God Om is named Brutha. He is the person responsible for the reformation of Omnianism. This is a transparent reference to the Christian reformer Luther. Both went publicly against the church, because they felt the church had lost their way. Brutha, however, is also a messianic figure. When he stands against the false prophet Vorbis he is to be tortured to death on a bronze turtle, but Om intervenes. After that the symbol of Omnianism becomes a turtle.

This is a reference to Jesus of Nazareth, who was put to death on the cross. Later the cross became the symbol of Christianity. Thus, Brutha is also a Discworld equivalent to Jesus.

Omnians observe several rules. There are the 512 Commandments that are written on the front doors of the citadel, which could be a reference to the 613 Commandments in Judaism. This is tied to Christianity when Om melts the commandments away when he saves Brutha from death by torture, much like Christianity doesn't observe the Commandments of Judaism because the rules of New Testament overrule them. Omnians also have Precepts, much like Catholic Christians do.

It is worth noting that while Omnianism bears a lot of Christianity's features, there are some elements that are strikingly different. For example, while Christianity is focused around the son of God, Omnianism waits around for the next prophet. In fact, in Omnianism Prophets arise after a specific amount of time has passed since the last one has been declared. In Christianity there is no such timetable. Another interesting difference between Omnians and Christians is that when they talk about Om, they say "the God", instead of "God" like Christians. Christians do not use the definitive article, because they believe there is only one god, their god. Thus, they don't need a definite article. Before the reformation, Omnians deny the existence of other gods, yet they use a definite article when talking about them. This could be a leftover from times when they knew other gods existed, but further explanations are not offered.

While there are some cases where Omnianism and Christianity differ, there are more things of note that are similar than that are different.

## **2.2 Omnianism as a parody**

So, we can state that Omnianism is inspired by Christianity, yet that is not all we can assume. For Omnianism is a parody of the Christianity's worst traits. Omnians are very aggressive towards anyone they consider heretics. Because they believe there is no other god than Om, heretics mean to them everyone who doesn't believe in him. In Pratchett's *Small Gods* (1992) Omnia launches an attack against Ephebe just because Didactylos lives there and has written the heretical theory. This is a reference to the Catholic crusades that took place between 1096 and 1487. The crusades were a

series of military incursions sanctioned by various Popes. Paul Everett Pierson (2009) lists the causes of the crusades: first, the medieval Christian thought that anything was justified to baptize people into the true Church. Second, the Church taught about purgatory, a place where a soul would pay for sins that were done in life and not already paid for. The Church claimed that the veneration of religious relics would shorten the time one would have to spend in purgatory. The greatest of these penances was a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, but right before the Crusades the Seljuk Turks forbade pilgrims entrance. Third, there were economic factors. Europe was considered overpopulated and suffered from a long famine.

We can see the some of the same elements in *Small Gods*: as Om tries to reach the high priests, he passes through a number of worshipers who are praying for divine help. Some extracts of prayers are shown:

'The drought has been on our village for three years... a little rain oh Lord?' [...] '...my wife, who is sick with the...' [...] '...make clean the well in our village, which is foul with...' [...] '...every year the locusts come, and...' (Pratchett, 1992 p. 58-59)

The prayers give an impression of a land that suffers from a long dry period, where disease weakens the populace and where pests destroy the crops. These factors seem to indicate that there is possibly a famine in the country. Another way to see the attack on Ephebe is the prohibition and persecution of paganism that Christianity enforced.

Besides the attack on Ephebe the Omnian attitude towards non-believers is shown by some of titles of Omnian hymns, like "*He is Trampling the Unrighteous with Hooves of Hot Iron*" (Pratchett 1992, p. 16), "*Claws of Iron shall Rend the Ungodly*" (Pratchett 1992, p. 260), "*The Way of the Infidel is A nest Of Thorns*" (Pratchett 1992, p.17) and "*Lo, the Infidels Flee the Wrath of Om*" (Pratchett 1992, p. 46). They support the image of Omnia as a nation that does not tolerate heretics or pagans. Omnia has an organization that focuses on weeding these out, boasting a familiar name: the Quisition of Omnia. It is clearly a reference to the Catholic Inquisition, the infamous group of organizations that tortured and persecuted anyone they felt went against the orthodoxy of Catholic Church. The Quisition does exactly this: it hunts down heretics and tortures them to gain confessions and information about other heretics. The Omnian Church redoubles its efforts in rooting out heretics during the time leading up to the declaration of the eighth prophet. The head of



Quisition is Decan Vorbis, who later unjustly assumes the title of prophet and uses the Quisition to try and execute Brutha, the true prophet.

The desert is a central focus of *Small Gods*. Brutha has a conversation about the prophets that preceded him, and Om informs him that the prophets Omnians practically worship were just men, who were talking to thin air, suffering of malnutrition and had consumed several hallucinogenic mushrooms, thus sometimes misinterpreting the message Om gave them. The desert plays a role in Christianity too:

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted[a] by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: “‘He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Matt 4:1-11)

Here we see the same themes: malnutrition and desert. In addition, it could be argued that the devil described in the bible was just a hungry man’s delusion, thus strengthening the argument that the prophets of Omnianism are a parody of Jesus.

In *Small Gods* it is told that Om has walked the world in many shapes before eventually being trapped in the form of a tortoise. He has manifested as different animals and claims that when he manifested as a tortoise, his original idea was to transform into a bull or a swan. These intentions are very similar to the Greek myths, where gods walk among mortals in animal forms for their own benefit. Om, however, has also appeared as a pillar of flame to one of his Prophets, which is a clear reference to the Bible, specifically the story of Moses, where God appears to Moses as a burning bush to tell him to lead the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan. The parody here comes from the reason Om appeared to his Prophet this way: it wasn’t to give him divine commandments or guidance, but

rather to relax. When asked what he said to the Prophet instead of dictating to him the holy precepts, Om answers: “As far as I can remember it was ‘Hey, see what I can do!’” (Pratchett 1992, p. 44)

In Christianity the metaphor of the shepherd and the lost sheep is a well-known and often repeated parable. In Luke 15:1-7 Jesus tells of a shepherd who rejoices more about finding his lost sheep than the 99 that have been accounted for. In Christianity this is a metaphor about bringing the faith to sinners, but in Pratchett’s novel (1992) the shepherd with a hundred sheep exists and is in fact Om’s first believer. He loses one lamb and goes searching for it, ultimately getting close enough to Om that the weak spirit can affect him and make into his first believer. The parodical element here comes from the reason for the shepherd search. In Christianity, it is about saving those who are lost and without faith, because the faithful need no saving. In Omnianism the reason is different: “In fact, it was because he was the kind of man prepared to spend days looking for a lost sheep that he had a hundred sheep” (Pratchett, 1992, p. 110). The shepherd is pragmatic: if one leaves a single sheep to wander off, the one is prone to letting another to follow, and soon one is without sheep.

The Omnians have a collection of holy books called the Septateuch. This could be a reference to the Pentateuch found in Judaism. Brutha explains that the Septateuch forbids consorting with demons, but the Prophet Fruni dictates that the act of resisting demons makes one grow strong in faith. This too could be a reference to the devil tempting Jesus. Another approach to Brutha’s explanation is that much like the Bible, Omnianism too contradicts itself a lot. The Omnian Septateuch is written by seven different Prophets, so it is natural that one Prophet would say something that another has spoken against. The Catholic Popes face this dilemma too: it took a long time for the Pope to admit that Earth is round and not flat,

After Brutha’s reformation Omnianism becomes a peaceful religion. They are encouraged to question the teachings of Om. This results in various sects of Omnianism, going so far that the Church schisms over mirrors, “one side saying that since they encouraged vanity, they were bad, and the other saying that since they reflected the goodness of Om they were holy” (Pratchett 1998, p. 19). This is Pratchett’s criticism of the Christianity’s fall into numerous factions. These denominations and cults are a result of the Churches reformation. The Church had split before into

Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The protestant reformation, however, created four new divisions of Christianity: Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist and Anglican. From these emerged a multitude of new denominations or cults. Having many different denominations could be both bad and good for a religion: prospective believers can find the denomination that is nearest to their core values, thus increasing the flock. It can, however, confuse believers. This happens to Pastor Oats in *Carpe Jugulum*. He loses his faith in Om for a while because the constant arguments between the different Omnian sects and feels that the word of Om has been watered down. He does not know what to believe in. When he finally finds his faith, it is his own way, and can be said to ironically again schism the church by teaching new things.

Pratchett often makes fun of Christianity through parody in small ways. One such case is when Om praises brother Brutha's singing voice by saying it "'Puts me in mind of that time there was the affliction of plague in Pseudopolis,' it said quietly, as the footsteps faded. 'What a wailing and a gnashing of teeth was there, all right.' It sighed. 'Great days. Great days!'" (Pratchett, 1992, p. 20). The phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" is present in the Bible seven times, six times in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 8:12, Matthew 13:42, Matthew 13:50, Matthew 22:13, Matthew 24:51, Matthew 25:30) and once in the Gospel of Luke (13:28). The phrase has become idiomatic to the English language, but considering the religious setting of *Small Gods*, Om's line is clearly a reference to the Bible. The meaning of the phrase, however, has been changed. In the Bible "weeping and gnashing of teeth" describes the horrors of Hell, where as Om is using it to describe the sound made by the voices of plague victims. Plagues are depicted in the Bible as calamities sent by God to punish the Egyptians (Exodus 7:14-12:36). So the reason for his wistful mood while recalling this incident could be because he is remembering the power he had or the divine actions he was able to make.

### **3. Pratchett as a postmodern writer**

Pratchett's main weapon in his literary arsenal is parody. In his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* Peter Barry (1994) argues, that parody is a part of both postmodernism and modernism. Pratchett, however, is not a modernist. Barry goes on to claim

that one way to differentiate between modernism and postmodernism “is to dissolve the sequential link between them, by retrospectively redefining certain aspects of modernism as postmodernist” (Barry 1994). Where modernism idolizes the past and nostalgia, Pratchett does not. For example, in *The Fifth Elephant* Pratchett has three sisters having a conversation about their home country. Two of them show modernistic traits, reminiscing about how beautiful and wonderful the past was. The parody here is made obvious when a man with no trousers appears: “‘Ah,’ said the middle sister dreamily. ‘Trousers ver better then’” (Pratchett 1999, p. 332). The third one tries to present new ideas but is silenced. But when they are offered the chance to leave this place full of nostalgia, they take it without hesitation. This sort of dismissal of the glorious past, even if it was, in fact, not glorious at all, goes against the modernist tradition. The celebratory attitude towards escaping the past and its suffocating rules, however, is one of Barry’s definitions of postmodernity. The sisters are also a reference to Anton Chekov’s play *Three Sisters* written in 1900, thus blending high and low culture and rejecting the distinction between the two, which is very typical to postmodernism.

In fact, all of *Small Gods* is a blend of the two, as it uses the religious high culture while being for a popular consumer base. It also parodies the philosophers of ancient Greece. A philosopher called Legibus runs in the street naked, because he has had an idea while bathing, and has run to get equipment needed to realize this idea, forgetting that he is not clothed. His idea is that with a lever of infinite length and an immovable place to stand, he could move the world. This is a parody of Archimedes, who according to Vitruvius Pollio (n.d.) had an idea while having a bath of measuring the proportion of gold in a king’s crown by measuring how much water the crown displaced compared to its weight. According to Pappus of Alexandria (340) he also claimed to be able to move the Earth if he was given a place to stand, using a long enough lever, making the parody in *Small Gods* even more transparent. Philosophy has always been held in high regard in the ruling social groups and can thus be considered high culture. To parody it for the benefit of a popular culture consumer base is once again an abolishment of the division of culture into high and low. Pratchett’s parody of philosophers in does not stop here: in his books Pratchett (1992) claims that philosophers are people smart enough to find a job with no heavy lifting, criticizing the high regard they are held in high society. Further on in the book he claims that philosophers have a lot of “useless ideas” and occasionally a very practical idea:

Does a Falling Tree in the Forest Make a Sound if There’s No one There to Hear It, and then just when you think they’re going to start dribbling one of ‘em says, Incidentally, putting a thirty-foot parabolic reflector on a high place to shoot the rays of the sun at an enemy’s ship would be a very interesting demonstration of optical principles. (Pratchett 1992, p. 124)

Here Pratchett parodies the high culture of philosophy by claiming that only the philosophical ideas with practical usage have worth. The idea of a tree falling without anyone to hear it fall is an old philosophical thought experiment first published in *The Chautauquan* (1883, p. 543) by an unknown author. While it has no practical application, the experiment has been popular in high society. Pratchett bringing it and the pragmatic usage of parabolic mirrors into his popular culture work is another example of him merging ideas from high culture into what would be considered by some as low culture.

Throughout *Small Gods* there can be seen a celebration of the fragmentation of the old, fixed belief system. It begins with the system being in place, and is slowly taken apart in the protagonist's head, and in the end throughout the country. It seems to be a reference to the history of Christian belief system that governed the world once, and the fact that Pratchett decides to parody it with his account on gods and belief and the injustices people make in the name of their faith is an epitome of postmodernism: at the same time being a celebration of the new age and its wonders and a reminder that we shouldn't idolize everything the past has to offer us.

Pratchett also states in his books that history is not always an accurate description of what happened. This is best demonstrated in *Jingo* (Pratchett 1997) and *Night watch* (Pratchett 2002). In *Jingo* there is a war that is eventually resolved by one character's political cunning, and the whole war is erased from history. The affair is later described only as "a misunderstanding". In *Night watch* an ancestor of Sir Samuel Vimes, who was a regicide, has his personal history rewritten by the historians. The once shunned and judged character gets a statue and is renowned as a liberator. Lyotard defines postmodernism as "incredulity towards metanarratives." (Lyotard 1979) The hidden meaning of Vimes' ancestral history being redefined is to look at history with a quizzical eye: who wrote this, and why did they write it? This skepticism of history is Lyotard's famous incredulity towards metanarrative, a narrative about history, again bolstering Pratchett as a postmodern writer.

Having established that Pratchett is not a modernist, but rather a postmodernist, we can analyze aspects that appear in both literary styles from a postmodern view point. To begin with, the book is filled with parodical references concerning Christianity. These have been discussed at length in the

previous chapter. Pratchett also uses another method, making the conscientious reader a postmodern critic. In fact, he makes the main character of *Small Gods* a postmodern critic. The way he portrays Omnian image of their Prophets is quite different towards the accounts of Om. Omnians consider the Prophets to be akin to gods themselves, getting their orders and rules straight from Om. When Brutha mentions the Prophet Cena, Om responds: “Tall fellow? Full beard? Eyes wobbling all over the place?” (Pratchett 1992 p. 36) and continues “‘I think I recall him,’ said the tortoise. ‘Eyes wobbled when he talked. And he talked all the time. To himself. Walked into rocks a lot’” (Pratchett 1992, p.36). After this he remarks that the desert has barely anything to eat besides mushrooms, implying that maybe that was the reason for the Prophet’s erratic behavior. The image of the Prophet has become much greater than the man actually was. There were never any divine commandments, just the ones a delirious man wrote down. While this is certainly a stab at Christianity, it is also a simulacrum, a hyperreality described by Jean Baudrillard. He found that a sign can mask reality, distort it or even replace it (Baudrillard 1981). Barry (1994) explains Baudrillard’s theory thusly: a sign reaches the emptiness of a simulacrum in four steps. First step is where the sign actually portrays reality. The second step is where the sign distorts reality, for example a CEO’s report that glamourizes his accomplishments and hides his failures. The third stage is that the sign disguises the fact there is no reality it seems to depict. The fourth claims the sign doesn’t point to any reality, for example an abstract work of art, which isn’t representational. The stage important here is the third stage, where there is no longer an underlying reality the sign tries to represent. The Omnians live their lives according to a series of rules that they believe comes from their god, but the god has never given such rules, and in some cases has never even manifested to the Prophet in question. Thus, the Septateuch, Omnian holy writings, have no reality behind their teachings. In the course of the story Brutha eventually realizes that the tortoise he is travelling with is in fact the Great God Om, and this means he realizes that not all commandments in the holy texts reflect Om’s vision. Another aspect of Omnianism that can be considered through Baudrillard’s third stage of a sign’s emptiness, is the religion without belief. The god, that is the reality, where all the belief should be directed at, has in fact only one believer in the whole country. Omnians in fact believe in the sign, the rules they are taught and the ruling priesthood, they believe in the infrastructure created by the faith and they may even believe in the statues made in Om’s honor. But they no longer believe in Om. The sign has become a separate entity from the reality it once portrayed.

The fiction Pratchett has created is a great example for a postmodern critic. In addition to the parody and simulacrum it contains, it mixes many different genres. The world is a fantasy world, but when it comes to Omnianism Pratchett has brought into the mix a religious connotation. The story in *Small Gods* is very much a thriller, with exciting twists in along the way. And the story is first and foremost a comedy. It is popular culture, which lends heavily from high culture, sometimes in reference, other times in parody.

At the same time Pratchett brings his atheism into play, as behind the story one can see Pratchett showing that in his view, the old religion of the past has brought nothing but trouble. In Omnianism these troubles are wars, tyrannical rules, people treated as worse than slaves and persecution of anyone called heretic. But you can find all of these in the history of Christianity as well. In fact, some of these themes can be found in conservative Christian sects even today: people claim that some things are wrong, because the Bible says so. Here we see a postmodern theme: not everything from the past should be revered without reservations. The criticism does not, however, end there: Omnianism reforms and begins to schism repeatedly. Thus, Pratchett seems to claim that even when the religion tries to change into a version that would fit the modern world, it can't because it is still tied to the past too strongly, leading to a futile effort, and a small group of believers, who are viewed as misguided by the other sects. The only way to step into a world of today is to shed the things from the past that do not work. And it can be said that Pratchett claims that Christianity, as well as other religions, are things best left in the past, because they cannot escape their pasts.

#### 4. Pratchett and atheism

Pratchett writes a lot about gods and belief. In his novels gods, however, even Om, the god most resembling the deity Christianity is established around, are depicted as indifferent, selfish and proud. In this way, they are very much like the gods in Greek mythology, basically people with supernatural skills and apparent immortality. The gods of Discworld on the other hand depend on humans: if they lose all their believers, they are banished from the abode of gods and must live in the desert. Pratchett is not saying, in his books, that gods are created by people: in fact, he clearly states how they come to be gods: they are entities who can create visions or small supernatural feats, and if someone starts to believe in them, they gain strength and can perform greater miracles, thus getting more believers. Essentially a god is not a god in Discworld, if he doesn't have believers. Thus, it can be argued, that in Discworld people create gods. People created Om. And Om is a parody of the god of Christianity. If one follows this line of deduction, it is not too much of a leap to conclude that Pratchett is, in fact, stating that he believes people create religions. One could very well say, that if everyone stopped believing in Christianity, the religion would cease to be. Thus, we can say that one of Pratchett's motives to write about gods in his novels is to prompt a reaction on their belief system from the reader, whether that reader is a religious person or an atheist.

The gods of Discworld are portrayed as greedy, capricious, prone to indulge themselves, easily bored and, first and foremost, prideful. It is, however, important to note that the deeds and words that paint the reader this picture are, in fact, the same deeds that can be found in many religions but lacking the explanation that Pratchett's parody gives them. When Om admits that he claimed there are no other gods, it is revealed that he knows they exist, but, according to him, exaggerated a bit because they aren't as holy as he is. This could be inserted into the Bible too. It would make sense for a god to deny the existence of other gods in order to get more followers. From an atheist point of view this would make even more sense, because an atheist reading of the situation would mean that there are no gods, only people who have created a religious institution and want that institution to have as many followers as possible to control. Even more importantly, considering that in Christianity the commandment "You shall not have other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3) is given to the Israelites when they are travelling through the desert and are losing faith. It could be thought that the commandments were a way for the ruling class to maintain order and control. So it could be



thought that Pratchett's parody of Christianity is trying to make people question the things he parodies, trying to get people to think about the events in the Bible from a human perspective, and looking beyond the scenes, to see who would benefit from the tenets of faith.

In his books Pratchett rarely speaks about atheism directly, preferring to let the reader make his own opinions on how to interpret his meaning. In *Feet of Clay*, however, Pratchett (1996) touches the subject without smoke screens. In Discworld, Gods exist, and because their existence is tied to the amount of belief they command, they punish atheists harshly. But in *Feet of Clay* there is a golem that becomes an atheist, claiming that it is also a religious position, because an atheist must think about the gods in order to actively deny them. He goes as far as to say that: "If the atheist truly did not believe, he or she would not bother to deny" (Pratchett 1996, p.188). And being a golem, he does not perish when the gods send thunderbolts to punish him for his views. Afterwards he claims that the thunderbolt is not much of an argument. This may be a stab at those who would try to silence atheist arguments by using violence.

In *Small Gods*, Pratchett has told us that belief makes gods powerful. Omnians are a theocracy, therefore Om should have thousands upon thousands of believers. But Om makes a sobering discovery: "And the thing about Brutha's flame of Belief was this: in all the Citadel, in all the day, it was the only one the God had found" (Pratchett 1992, p. 78). The whole of Omnia has but one true believer. This seems, at a glance, quite impossible. But in fact, it is exactly what happens in religions: over time, most people stop to believe. Religion turns into motions one goes through and stops to be something one does to honor one's patron deity. The critique here is this: why would one belong to a religious order, if one lacks belief? Why would one defend the mistakes that order makes? The answer of course is that it is something that has been always done. These rituals have become a part of our culture. But do they have a place in our culture, when the foundation behind them does not exist anymore? Or should their place be re-evaluated?

Omnian religion is led astray and leaves only the rituals behind it. The god behind the religion no longer matters and the priests run everything, there are numerous commandments without faith behind them. This all changes when people start to believe in Om again, and when the new Prophet, who actually believes in Om, starts to make new, less restricting rules. This could be construed as

Pratchett defending the moderate religions in general, but one should look beneath the surface. The horrors done by the Quisition and the Omnian military campaigns would not have been possible, if there had not been a religion to begin with. Without people having commandments to back their political expansionist goals, the ruling class would have had to motivate the people in a different way, and maybe would not have had any way to accomplish that. And people that have a religious text to tell them that it is acceptable to do horrible things to infidels can rationalize their work better than people who have been told that the law says that one is prohibited from inflicting pain upon others. So even with the change in Omnian views, Pratchett condemns the religion. This condemnation is further brought into view in the story concerning pastor Oates, who goes into the wild Überland to preach to sinners, bringing his axe to protect himself. While Oates is described as a hero, he uses violence in his work converting people to Omnianism. The fact that he uses violence only to protect himself from dangerous people who do not convert may be justified, but it gives a precedent for using violence in converting believers. And if the religion has once changed, it is possible for it to change again, for the worse. And this is not limited to Omnianism. Every religious movement has the capacity to become violent towards heretics or non-believers. In fact, the Islam is a religion that teaches peace and love, but there exist people who are radicalized into killing innocent people in its name. Conservative and radicalized Christians beat up and kill people who they consider going against the teachings of the Bible or who they are afraid will threaten their religious views with their own. All these acts would be impossible if there were no religions to begin with.

The general Fri't in *Small Gods* is portrayed as a less than religious man. When he faces judgment after his death, he finds solace in his belief that “on the whole, and by and large, if a man lived properly, not according to what any priests said, but according to what seemed decent and honest inside, then it would, at the end, more or less, turn out all right” (Pratchett 1992, p. 87). This reflects the view of many nominal Christians. It also is a pathway towards an atheist's view on morality. One does not have to believe in a god to be decent, and one is not automatically amoral even if one does not believe.

But what about people who believe? Who have no doubt that the people in charge are right, otherwise they couldn't be in charge, because the deity of the religion could not allow that to happen? Or that should they be in the wrong, it would be part of a bigger plan? This is another point

Pratchett raises with Omnianism. Om himself questions how the Quisition knows who they should torture and what if they were wrong. Brutha answers that the Quisition being wrong is impossible, because Om guides them. In fact, the people the Quisition torture must have sinned, because if they were innocent, Om would not have brought the Quisition to them. Even Om is perplexed about this. "It's their fault they get tortured. Did I really say that?" (Pratchett 1992, p. 77) Brutha claims that the act of torture lets the badness out of people. And when faced with the fact that Quisition kills people, he informs the god that pain in this life saves from torment in the hells. But Brutha is just reciting the teachings of Omnianism. A whole nation lives by these rules. And their god has no idea it is happening. Therein lies Pratchett's criticism: a lot of religions teach that pain or effort in this world will ease the burden in the next. But what happens, when people in charge decide that they can cause pain to others and it is just helping them in the next life? Or maybe they decide that they are always right, by default, otherwise they would not be in their position. Catholic Church for one believes in papal infallibility. What would happen, if the pope decided, that all non-believers must be killed on sight? It may seem like a remote possibility, but the Pope once proclaimed a holy war against the infidels for political reasons. Religions have a hold on people that can be hard to estimate. We know that there are nominal believers in every religion, but what we can't know is how many believers would answer, if their religious leader would call for blood. The political power of religions has changed, it could change again. So what Pratchett is trying to do is make everyone question their religion and question it in every step. Do you believe in it? Is it worth believing? Who are the leaders? Do they act according to the teachings of the religion? Do they act according to your morals? If you should answer any of these questions in a negative manner, the next question becomes: why, then, do you support such an institution?

Using the mouth of Om, Pratchett seems to bring out his own beliefs. One such instance is when Om muses on the things that humans consider miraculous. He feels that they are utterly unimpressive, compared to natural phenomena happening all the time. This is summarized when he thinks: "As if the turning of sunlight into wine, by means of vines and grapes and time and enzymes, wasn't a thousand times more impressive and happened all the time" (Pratchett 1992, p. 141). By writing this it feels that Pratchett is trying to say that people should not look for miracles, because they are surrounded by miraculous things all the time. And thus, people need not believe in gods, because the natural miracles happen with or without them, people just need to start appreciating them, instead of water turning into wine.

In creating a world where gods are a reality, not just something one has faith in and hope exist, Pratchett has created an environment where he can criticize religions without attacking any of them directly, making the person connect the dots themselves. Doing this makes people be less defensive about their faith, and the goal seems to be to have a person acknowledge the criticism, consider it to be aimed at something else than his or her own belief system, accept the criticism as reasonable and then apply it to their own faith. But most of all Pratchett encourages people to think. Because as he puts it in *Small Gods* “Gods don’t like people not doing much work. People who aren’t busy all the time might start to think” (Pratchett 1992, page 50). This quote has a loud implication that Pratchett believes people who start to think will start to question their gods.

## **5. Conclusions**

In this thesis I have explored whether Omnianism is a parody of Christianity or some other monotheistic religion. After careful consideration, the study yielded that while Omnianism has a few aspects from other monotheistic religions, in its core it is a parody of Christianity. A close reading of *Small Gods* showed that the novel contains numerous postmodern themes. The thesis found that while the audience of Pratchett’s works is a popular culture consumer base, it blends the so-called high and low cultures, destroying the division between the two. It can be said that Pratchett also brings forth in his texts his view that the past is not glamorous and something to idolize, but should be visited with irony, while also repeatedly bringing forth a positive attitude towards escaping the fixed system of belief he has created into his works. These seem to reflect his views on the fragmentation of the authority of faith in the past. The thesis concluded that Pratchett seems to favor postmodernist approach to issues, using parody and discarding the cultural hierarchy between high and low culture. This is not surprising, considering the implied atheist undertones the study found in the novel. Pratchett’s main theme seems to be how the disassembly of the old belief system in Omnianism is a good thing, and as it is a parody of Christianity, the argument is extended to include it too. Pratchett tries to argument against the religions of the world, starting with Christianity, but expanding his critique to other religions as well. By bringing forth his critique in this way he has shielded himself from the angry receptions to his arguments, because the critique can be seen only if one sees the problem in his or her own religion. The postmodern attitude, irony and parody is a perfect conduit for this sort of atheist critique. The thesis suggests further studies into other religious institutions in Pratchett’s books and the similarities between other known atheist

writers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It would also be prudent to see how Pratchett treats political issues in Discworld novels, and how his religious views in his novels affect them, using this thesis as a base for the study.

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